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## Are we ready to test new curricula? The experience of women in interfaith learning

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Teny Pirri-Simonian

# Are we ready to test new curricula?

## The experience of women in interfaith learning<sup>1</sup>

*Zusammenfassung: Der Beitrag schildert Hintergründe, Motive und konzeptionelle Überlegungen eines internationalen, interreligiösen Fortbildungsprogramms für Frauen, die in religiös pluralistischen Gesellschaften leben und gemeinsam Möglichkeiten von Mediation und Konfliktbearbeitung entwickeln.*

### Introduction

The tension between the will to affirm one's identity and the need to recognise religious, cultural or ethnic differences (pluralism) is an ancient one. Christians addressed this tension by the Biblical call to the church "to make clear God's loving, eternal purpose to heal and reconcile humankind to God in Jesus Christ, and to restore wholeness to all creation,"<sup>2</sup> through programmes of mission and dialogue. Social scientists have described this tension in terms of three concepts of social relations: 1) assimilation into one dominant group (losing identity), 2) closing into one's own shell and excluding others and 3) accepting a system of Cupertino, tolerance based on the principle of 'live and let live' (parallel existence). Unfortunately, these models have produced massacres, religious wars and segregated societies.

Colonialism, science and technology have brought people of different races/ethnicity's, cultures and faiths into close contact with one another, and thereby called into question the concepts of national identity and citizenship embodied within the framework of a nation state. Fears and prejudices that were once suppressed by the need for 'good citizenship' are now being expressed openly in places such as Lebanon, Sri Lanka, the former Yugoslavia and Chechnya. One way to pre-empt conflict and confrontation is to set processes that deal with these fears and prejudices. Educators should attempt to inspire people to incorporate the disciplines of self-criticism and listening. They should stimulate people to seek to understand others' traditions and beliefs, to recognise the divine in the religion of the other, acknowledge the righteousness/goodness of the values and spiritual richness of other religions, discover comparable ethical and moral principles in the cultures of the other and respect the other as

a fellow human being, without compromising their own identity. These are difficult educational tasks.

### The Background of Ecumenical Education Work

In the World Council of Churches (WCC), this concern was articulated in 1970 through the "Programme on Dialogue with Other Living Faiths." While this programme has aided the peaceful resolution of conflicts and promoted inter-communal living, it has neither been able to prevent conflicts nor provide the tools to affirm identity in dialogue. How can we enable Christians to remain obedient to the Gospel of Jesus Christ within their own cultural setting while witnessing in dialogue with people of other faiths? How can we help to build a vision of a new world that affirms distinct identities and communities and provides the space for all people to fulfil themselves within the framework of their faith experience?

In June 1990, the WCC Subunit on Education and Renewal organised a meeting on Education 2000, in Montreal, Canada. This workshop directed the staff to concentrate on education and formation for inter-religious and intercultural living as a priority issue.

Then, in October 1992, a workshop entitled 'Christian Religious Education in Multi-Religious Societies,' was held in Salatiga, Indonesia, in collaboration with the Satya Wacana Christian University. This setting provided the occasion to explore more specifically the issues of Christians and Moslems living and learning together.

The participants recommended that the WCC assist in the education and formation

of religious people living in pluralist societies. They set the following goals for this new programme:

- 1) to identify teaching models and resources for Christians for pluralist living;
- 2) to identify women's experiences in inter-religious, intercultural living that carry within them elements of educational methods;
- 3) to enable women to develop educational methods and resources from these learning/teaching experiences.

During the implementation phase, the work involved Sunday School curriculum writers and teachers and women's groups. The office has developed new curricula and new methods of teaching with the Sunday School group, designed to help learners acknowledge the religious and cultural differences of their neighbours. The Boldern Protestant Academy and the Ecumenical Forum of European Christian Women have joined to create the European Women's Summer Academy, which, since 1993, has been bringing together women from all parts of Europe. Every other year about 120 women from some 25 countries gather at Boldern/near Zürich to reflect on the challenges of living in a multicultural Europe. We started working on the Summer Academy after the fall of communism. We felt the need to contribute, together with women from all parts of the former Soviet bloc, to democracy education and to the development of the idea of civil society.

The Summer Academy explores such issues as the tensions between nationalist memories and new European challenges, women's roles in multicultural/multi-religious, often patriarchal

chal, contexts and the struggle for new identities. The curriculum is intended to bring together new theoretical feminist insights, practical experiences of the Christian women's movements Europe-wide, and the dynamics of working and living together. It is also an experiment in inter-medial learning. Issues are taken up in a variety of ways: in lectures and theme-centred discussion groups, in creative and artistic workshops, which reflect the theme in another medium, and in sessions in which participants share worship/prayer elements from various traditions. The summer academy has regularly included workshops on inter-religious issues. Particularly dynamic have been the workshops on Christian-Muslim concerns, which have included women from the former Yugoslavia working together on issues and thereby reflecting the process of co-operation. The workshops incorporate such elements as biography work, sensitivity training, with creative transposition (role playing, etc), informative and reflective inputs, the practical work of project development (e.g. mapping projects of inter-religious living in everyday life) and elements of feast-day celebration in family and community.

A second undertaking, the European Women's College, a women's project in alternative education, headed by Reinhild Traitter-Espiritu and Elisabeth Raiser-von Weizsäcker, is modelled on the concept of a travelling college. Different modules, which usually last about eight to ten days, are organised in different parts of Europe. These modules concentrate on women's issues that play a prominent role in the context of a particular location. They link these issues to the women's movements and gender-studies centres of a specific location and present them in the 'language' (the conceptual framework) of the women concerned. This is an effort to contextualize education and enable the women to define their own problems.

The learning process involves conceptual work, dialogue and creative actualisation.

### Why start with women?

In education for inter-religious and intercultural living, there are two important religious values, right relationships and life in community. The role of inter-religious and intercultural education is to insure that these values are respected. These values come mainly from religion. For Christians, living a God-centred life, means living with spirituality, where the living God becomes the guiding force of human activity. God-centred life is rooted in the Christ-event and the Gospel, and expresses its quality through the Holy Spirit. Living such a life is not a one-time act but a continuing experience of taking the God-centred life to one's own context and transforming that context. Spirituality is the clear awareness of this experience, and is central to building right relationships and life in community. Life in community includes reciprocity and responsibility.

Reciprocity in most social relationships implies power relationships conditioned by the values of a society. Historically, women have been subordinate, men super-ordinate. Men have justified this situation by claiming that it is based on either divinely ordained or universally accepted human principles and values that stand for the common good and

the good of the individual. However, these claims are based on the interpretation of those values over time. Between the sources and the application, there is a profound chasm.

By reflecting on their role in society, women begin to build awareness and develop new models of gender relations. For a number of reasons, this has not been easy:

- No existing model of democracy addresses the actual needs of contemporary societies. The great democratic ideals of liberty, basic rights, political and social equality and solidarity have been distorted. Criteria for gender analysis and relations in society can be determined only within the framework of clearly defined democratic values. Women are studying the great democratic ideals in their desire to give them credibility and to shape societal values accordingly.

- The notion of people-hood has been changed by the recognition that religion- and ethnic-belonging are legitimate sources of identity. This new understanding of people-hood has provided the space for people of many identities to exist in a mutually beneficial relationship and to respect the differences of others. Countries currently following a pluralist model, however, in which religious and ethnic identities are recognised, are exclusivist and anti-democratic. In addition, religion and ethnicity are often used to cover other struggles in society. For example, behind the struggles for self-determination and freedom of religious expression, one also finds issues of ideology, identity, economic disparity and social and political discrimination. Usually, women's problems and concerns remain hidden or ignored in these complexities. Therefore, women and men concerned with the practice of gender equality within the social and religious institutions of their communities should scrutinise carefully issues related to religion, ethnic identity and socio-economic problems. They should also attempt to determine how these struggles touch their concerns.

- The emergence of religion and ethnicity as sources of identity has created new problems in conflict resolution. This situation requires more flexible and open instruments "to legitimise ethnic identity without making it incompatible with the formation of larger units of identity based on mutually enriching and beneficial co-operation ..." (Rupesinghe u.a. 1966, S.3). Dialogue is an open and flexible model. New ways are particularly necessary in cases where problems have long histories and are deeply rooted in belief systems. In these situations prejudices and stereotypes have been uncritically incorporated into the body of knowledge that is transmitted from generation to generation. Among the injustices produced by these prejudices and stereotypes are oppression of and violence against women.

Education has a role to play in managing and resolving conflict. Because educational institutions and processes can reinforce stereotypes and prejudices, we need to encourage models of education that will build awareness and critical consciousness (to deal with distorted histories) and that will train people to negotiate. Consciousness training for negotiation is both a preventive and a problem-solving paradigm. The learning model calls for 'memory work.' That is, we have to admit our complicity in situations even when we think we are only victims. The model calls us to be aware of cultural differences among the learners and to recognise different



*Frauen lernen gemeinsam (Foto: Stiftung Berufliche Bildung, Hamburg)*

speech forms (ideological and non-ideological). An implicit component of this process is cultural negotiation, in which the learner comes to know 'who he or she is' and 'what he or she wants.'

Women appreciate this model because it requires a careful reconsideration of the spiritual, religious, cultural, social, economic and political forces in society as they affect people's lives, and because it calls for an integrated way of looking at these forces, without undermining one's cause for the benefit of another. This approach to education enables people to sort out the 'negotiable' and 'non-negotiable' factors in pluralist living and gives them the tools to build non-competitive pluralist societies and to build solidarity on the elements that unite them. If carefully pursued, this approach could impact other models of education and inspire new paradigms for conflict resolution.

While democratic values, religious values and values related to identity and belonging are not essentially coercive or exploitative, leaders have often manipulated them and turned them into engines of coercive power. In order to counteract this misuse of values, women should seek to understand how democracy and democratic values and religion and religious values relate to the spiritual life of the faithful and to their human experience, shape institutions and norms and condition peoples' daily life.

#### **Models for Women Learning together: Vision and Ethic**

It is within the above-mentioned context that women are seeking new models of political theory and educational processes.

The theory of civil society is already providing women with the elements of a new vision and space for them to assess their roles and rights in society in relation to democratic values. The co-operative work of the WCC and the European Women's Academy helped the staff identify two models

of educational processes with a specific approach (pedagogy) and content (curricula). Both models, a short workshop and a longer-term diploma programme, aim to help women reflect upon their experiences of living together with other faiths (in many cases this also means living with Christians of other confessional families), build common grounds for pluralist living and establish the framework for a global ethic.

While the points of reference are women, women's experiences and women's framework of analysis, the model has been applied to mixed groups. It is clear that the fresh insights brought by women to education can apply to the wider society.

#### **Short-term workshops**

These include five one-and-a-half hour sessions.

*Session 1:* Building community. The 'learners' as a community and the community at home. This session includes sensitivity training, during which the group discusses history, prejudices and memory work.

*Session 2:* Definitions of 'good life' and the place of traditions. Discussion focuses on life together in the world and in community. 'Religions and the 'good life,' Utopia or reality, for whom? The role of culture in sharing the good life.

*Session 3:* Finding the common ground. Global efforts in defining the 'good life'. (Discussion on the Declaration Toward a Global Ethic: Parliament of the World's Religions. 4 September 1993, Chicago, U.S.A.). The women felt that because the Global Ethic Project takes men as the anthropological starting point for the ethics it proposes, it excludes the life situation and experiences of women.

*Session 4:* Individual work or group work for a creative expression of experiences.

*Session 5:* Evaluation of the workshop and presentation of individual or group work.

#### **Learning for interfaith living: a diploma programme**

The following project builds on insights gained in the short-term workshops on interfaith learning. Although the project is designed with the European experience in mind and will be implemented in Europe, it takes the Middle Eastern situation into consideration because of that area's experiences in interfaith living. Once the pilot is completed, the project will be reformulated into an interfaith learning project for women and men in community.

The curriculum is designed to:

- affirm religious identity as an antidote to insecurity and conflict;



- build awareness of the complexities of the secular context in which religions exist today;
  - identify and make intentional the contribution of women to shaping a Europe of many faiths;
  - contribute to the ongoing discourse on human rights/women's rights;
  - bring insights from the women's movement and feminist scholarship into inter-religious teaching.
- in doing this, the project hopes to help generate a democratic climate and practice in all spheres of life, including the religious one.

### The goals of the project

The goals of the project are:

- to educate Christian women who live with people of other faiths to express their identity as Christian women and to learn to understand and respect the identity of others. The pilot project will focus on the theme of Christians and Moslems living together;
- to help women understand the faith of their neighbours and make them aware that living with differences can be a source of enrichment in building community;
- to show the complex relationship between religion, culture, politics and economics, and to highlight the factors that lead people to misuse religion in conflict situations. It is hoped that in this way the project will contribute to the process of building a 'culture of peace';
- to identify religious principles, moral and ethical values, and norms that are comparable and that can be negotiated for a life together;
- to establish principles and moral and ethical values that are distinct to each faith and may not always be grasped by people of other faiths,
- to establish a platform where the terms of living together are defined, and to test the feasibility of the document proposed by the World Parliament of Religions on "Global Ethic" from the perspective of women.

### Proposed Methodology of the modules:

1. The pilot project will include five modules, each of which will take place in a different location.
2. in co-operation with the International Electronic Women's University, select staff may tutor learners between the modules through electronic media,. In this way the pilot project will imaginatively combine learning through direct and through virtual communication.
3. Teaching will be interdisciplinary and intermedial. A variety of methods will allow for learning at different levels, and for the development of cognitive skills and emotional and social competence to deal with inter-religious situations.
4. Methods will include:
  - a. sensitivity training,
  - b. experiential learning through exposure programmes to local situations,
  - c. biography work
  - d. lecturing /academic work

Students will be required to become involved in a practical project and to document their involvement.

The courses are structured in such a way that the same

issues are taken up several times, but looked at in the light of newly acquired theoretical and practical insights.

### Participants

The project will be designed to help people who live and work in multi-religious contexts to develop sensitivity, knowledge and skills in order to act in their life and work situations in a better and more informed way.

Its target audience will be:

- social workers, teachers, pastors and students in these professions;
- personnel managers or people in similar positions;
- police or security personnel, immigration officers, etc;
- journalists and communication workers;
- trainers of volunteer workers and other personnel in interfaith projects.

For practical reasons the working language of the pilot project will be English.

### Conclusion

Religious and cultural pluralism are here to stay. Humanity cannot remain indifferent to genocides and conflicts happening in the name of religion and culture. Nor can humanity allow religion to be exploited for special interests. Religion provides a sense of identity, security, spirituality and life-giving values. The time has come for educators to find new ways of thinking, a new language and new models of teaching/learning for a harmonious interfaith living. Some Christian women and feminists who are questioning their traditional roles in society, are already expressing themselves in new ways and proposing new ways of interfaith living. The proposed curricula is the outcome of such women's work. If given a chance, it may transform the world into a new reality. In this new world, the good life will become the norm rather than the privilege of a selected few.

### Anmerkungen:

- 1 The proposed curricula present a challenge to Christians to affirm their vocation in religiously and culturally pluralist societies.
- 2 Programme Unit II - Mission. Education and Witness. Minutes of the Commission Meeting, 9-16 May 1992. Evian France, p.38.

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